

Japanese Student Perspectives towards Study Abroad

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International student mobility is a significant feature of a global higher education landscape that includes international partnerships, branch campuses, education hubs, and massive open online courses (MOOCS). In 2012, over 4.5 million students were enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship¹, more than double the number of foreign tertiary students enrolled worldwide in 2000, and more than five times the number from when data collection began in 1975 (OECD, 2014). The benefits of such mobility to host and home nations, educational institutions and individual students have been widely reported (e.g. Johnson, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2011; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Consequently, international student recruitment and study abroad initiatives hold a central place in the internationalization strategies of many higher education systems and institutions.

The Japanese government has long valued international student mobility, viewing international students as prime players in strategy for higher education internationalization, and these students have been the focus of many government-led initiatives. However, in recent years, following a dramatic decline in the number of Japanese students studying abroad and significant media focus on the inward-looking tendencies of Japanese youth, government and higher education institution (HEI) attention turned toward outward mobility. Initiatives to increase the numbers of Japanese students overseas have begun in earnest, and perhaps as a result, the past two years have seen an uptick in the number of Japanese students venturing abroad for academic study. Meiji

University has concentrated much effort into internationalization activities in recent years and has seen the number of its students electing to study abroad grow almost three-fold between 2009 and 2013 (Meiji University, 2015). This research study examines Japanese outward student mobility and analyzes a survey of Meiji University undergraduate students to find out about their perspectives towards studying abroad.

The Benefits of Study Abroad

Historically, international student mobility involves students crossing national borders in pursuit of a high-quality education and credentials perhaps unobtainable in the student's home country. This phenomenon accounts for much of the recent rapid increase in internationally mobile students as populous countries with rapidly growing economies struggle to meet the increased demands for higher education and students seek opportunity elsewhere (British Council, 2014a; Verblik, 2007). However, international student mobility is also widely understood to be beneficial at other levels. Individual students are presumed to benefit in ways which enable them to better navigate a globalized society and increase their future employability. Research indicates that international experience can develop intercultural adaptability and sensitivity (Williams, 2005) and foster open-mindedness, patience, flexibility, and cultural self-awareness (Root & Ngam-pornchai, 2013; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Students also become more globally engaged, taking action to work for the common good (Paige & Fry, 2014; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić & Jon, 2009) and gain foreign language proficiency and knowledge of foreign cultures (Teichler, Gordon & Maiworm, 2001). HEIs with high levels of student mobility gain prestige as an international outlook is regarded as a measure of university quality. This enables HEIs to rise in world university rankings, which in turn draws in more international students and further boosts the international reputation of the institution (Hazelkorn, 2011; Van Damme, 2014). At the national level, student mobility may enhance a country's economic and international competitiveness (John-

son, 2011), increase social cohesion (Powell & Finger, 2013), boost immigration (Knight, 2012), promote democratic values (Spilimbergo, 2009) and improve human rights practices (Atkinson, 2010).

Japanese Students Abroad and the Issue of Inward-looking Youth

Against this backdrop of increased student mobility and recognition of the benefits that studying outside of one's home country can bring, Japan has gained the reputation that its youth is risk-averse and inward-looking, not interested in overseas study. According to data from international sources and compiled by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the number of Japanese students studying abroad at HEIs hit a high of 82,945 in 2004, but by 2010 the number had fallen to 58,010 and by 2011, the number of Japanese students overseas had declined further, reaching a low of 57,501 (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2014) (see Figure 1). In around 2010, media reports, both in Japanese and English,

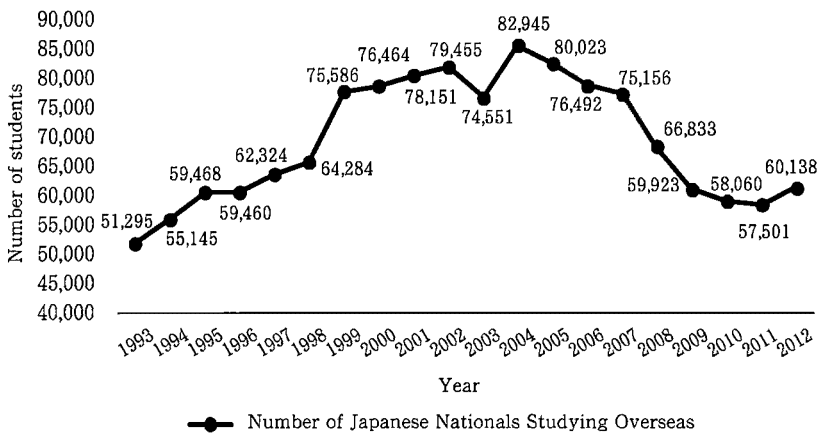


Figure 1 Number of Japanese nationals enrolled in overseas HEIs

source: MEXT (2015a) compiled from OECD, Education at a Glance; UNESCO Institute for Statistics; IIE, Open Doors; Ministry of Education of China; Ministry of Education Republic of China (Taiwan) data.

referring to the *uchimuki*, or inward-looking, tendencies of Japan's students began to intensify. For example, opinion pieces published by news outlets proclaimed that Japanese students have a "Fear of Studying Abroad" ("Fear of studying abroad", 2010), "Shun the World Stage" (Dujarric, 2012) and "hinder [the] nation's economic growth" (Yamamoto & Iwaki, 2011), declaring that we must "Reverse Japan's Insularity" (Fukushima, 2010). Despite media rhetoric, close examination of the data regarding international mobility and research reports addressing the issue have largely concluded that the decline in the number of students studying overseas is not the result of the students' outlook, but the result of various obstacles that simply do not incentivize study abroad for many tertiary students (e.g. British Council, 2014b; CULCON, 2013).

In a commentary on education and the problem of introspective youth, Imoto (2013) commented that the popular discourse emphasizing the introverted nature of young Japanese is based on an over-reliance on the data pertaining to the number of Japanese students studying in the United States. Indeed, the number of Japanese students studying in the United States declined much more rapidly than did the number of students studying in other countries. Between the years 2001 and 2011, the United States experienced a drop of 57% in the number of inbound Japanese students. However, there have been significant increases in the number of students studying in Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East (Table 1). Examination of the overseas study destinations of Japanese students shows shifting patterns of student mobility and indicates changes in the areas of interest for students. It also suggests a Japanese student body open to new international experiences.

It is appropriate to note that the decreasing size of Japan's youth cohort is often cited as a reason for the decline in the number of Japanese students overseas (Harden, 2011; Imoto, 2013; Shimmi, 2011). However, this argument is not particularly valid when one consults university enrollment data. Despite a 20% drop in the total number of 18 year-olds in the general population (Statistics Bureau, 2015), there has been an increase in the number of new entrants enrolling in four-year univer-

Table 1 The number of Japanese students studying abroad, by geographic region

	Number of Japanese Students Overseas		Change
	2001	2011	
North America	48,288	21,817	−55%
(United States)	(46,810)	(19,966)	(−57%)
Europe	11,096	9,653	−13%
Asia	15,826	22,556	+43%
Oceania	2,906	3,178	+9%
Central and	21	224	+967%
South America			
Middle and Near East	14	51	+264%
Africa	0	22	—
TOTAL	78,151	57,501	−27%

Source: MEXT, 2004; JASSO, 2014

sities and the total number of university students rose by 5% between 2000 and 2010 (MEXT, 2015b). Perhaps a more viable demographic explanation for the decreasing numbers of students studying overseas is the outcome created by the combination of the increased enrollment capacity of Japanese HEIs (the number of four-year HEIs has increased in the last few decades), the higher tertiary enrollment rates, and the lower levels of scholastic achievement of students raised under the *yutori* or 'relaxed' education system (in which the number of classroom hours were decreased) (Kariya, 2015; Kinmonth, 2005). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that Japanese students are less competitive than they once were when it comes to being accepted to universities overseas (e.g. Fukushima, 2010). This issue was exacerbated with the addition of a speaking component to the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in 2006. This test is required for acceptance into many overseas HEIs, and Japanese students find the speaking component particularly challenging (ETS, 2015).

The overall decline in tertiary students studying abroad masks other promising trends in Japanese international education. Push-factors that might have once driven Japanese students away from home to seek long-term education abroad have decreased. For example, it is

now possible to gain a much more international educational experience *within* Japan. There is increasing diversity in Japan both in terms of the people living and studying within its borders (Tsuneyoshi, 2011) and in terms of the types of higher education available — there are increasing numbers of HEIs that offer a broad liberal arts education,² provide an internationally-focused curriculum³, and teach growing numbers of courses through the medium of English⁴. Students participating in these models of higher education are much more likely to study abroad on short-term programs, and consequently may participate in modes of overseas study that are not captured in national outbound student numbers⁵.

In addition, outbound student data does not capture the number of high school students going abroad. Study abroad agencies such as *Ryugaku Journal* have reported a surge in the number of high school students going overseas in recent years (Ryugaku Journal, 2012). Another promising trend in international education is the increasing number of students going overseas through inter-university exchange agreements and partnerships, which rose from 18,570 in 2004 to 45,082 in 2013 (JASSO, 2006, 2015). It is hoped that strengthening collaboration between Japanese and overseas universities will encourage more and more students to choose a study abroad experience.

Japanese Student Sentiment towards Overseas Study

Research studies examining Japanese perspectives towards study abroad have found university students to be more positively inclined towards overseas study than media rhetoric might suggest. In small scale studies conducted by Asaoka and Yano (2009), Bradford and Fujimoto (2014), and Lassegard (2013), the majority of students surveyed expressed interest in studying abroad (67%, 89% and 57% respectively). They indicated desires for an intercultural experience (29% of 76 students who had not previously studied abroad, Asaoka & Yano, 2009); to improve their English abilities (54% out of 35 students who were interested in studying abroad, Bradford & Fujimoto, 2014); and to

expand their international/global perspectives (68% of 210 students who indicated that they wanted to or planned to study abroad, Lassegard, 2013).

Larger-scale studies of more nationally-representative samples do not show as much student interest in study abroad, but nevertheless display positive trends. In a survey of 3,256 Japanese students conducted by Recruit Marketing Partners in 2013, 33% said they were interested in studying outside of Japan. This figure is 6% higher than in a similar 2011 survey. As a reason for their interest in study abroad, 75% cited a desire to communicate in a foreign language (ICEF, 2013). The British Council (2014b) surveyed 2,004 students and recent graduates and found that 45% would like to or have already participated in a period of overseas study. Among this group of students, 79% indicated that the main factor influencing their desire to study overseas was to improve their language skills. When considering student attitudes towards overseas study, the most revealing finding from this study is that Japanese student sentiment towards study abroad (45% positive responses) is more favorable than that of students from the United Kingdom (37% positive responses) and United States (44% positive responses) when polled in a similar survey (British Council, 2014a). The report concludes that “concerns about overseas study are not due to a cultural mind-set that is exclusive to Japan” and that “students in Japan weigh the opportunity to gain skills against the cost of overseas study” (British Council, 2014b, p. 22).

Despite a common understanding among the academics who have examined the issue closely that the inward-looking youth concept is a myth, (e.g. British Council, 2014b; Imoto, 2013), the rhetoric has served as a useful tool for reinvigorating policy discussion about international student mobility (see Imoto, 2013, for a full discussion of how the media rhetoric of insularity came to be appropriated by educational policy makers). It kick-started the implementation of many initiatives designed to internationalize Japan's education system. Since 2011, increased government funding for outbound mobility has led to the creation of initiatives that include collaborative mobility programs,

joint degrees, credit transfer mechanisms, and scholarships for study abroad (see the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science website for information about these projects). In 2015, MEXT (2015b) reported an increase in the number of Japanese nationals studying abroad in the academic year 2012–2013 (see Figure 1), and JASSO figures for 2013–2014 (although based on a different dataset) indicate a continuing increase.

Student Perspectives Survey

To develop an up-to-date picture of perspectives towards study abroad among students at Meiji University, students studying in the Faculty of Business Administration between April 2014 and June 2015 were invited to complete an online dual-language Japanese and English questionnaire. In-depth data about the students' perspectives towards studying overseas was gathered via both closed- and open-ended items pertaining to the students' aspirations to study abroad and perceived utility of a period of study overseas for future employment. In order to enable understanding of the student participants, the questionnaire also gathered background information regarding the students' university study, English-language ability, previous international experience (including periods of time spent living or studying abroad), and future employment plans. The number of items presented to each participant varied as a result of their answers to previous items. Students were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and were aware that the results of the questionnaire would be used as part of a research project.

All students invited to complete the questionnaire had elected to enroll in internationally-orientated courses delivered through the medium of English, or were taking such courses as part of an internationally-orientated academic track. Some of the participants had already committed to a short period of academic study overseas. Therefore, it was expected that these students would look favorably on international study and not display the inward-looking tendencies with which Japa-

nese youth have been labeled. Given this participant profile, the results of the survey are intended to highlight the perspectives of a group of students motivated towards study abroad.

Participant information

Forty-six students from Meiji University's School of Business Administration completed the questionnaire, 52% were male and 48% were female. The majority (74%) were enrolled in their first year at university, others were second-year students. None of the participants had taken either the TOEFL ITP or iBT (Test of English as a Foreign Language Institutional Testing Program or internet Based Test) at the time of participation. However, 29 students reported TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores ranging from 430 to 805 out of a total of 990, with a median score of 635. TOEIC scores are used by almost 800 companies in Japan to assess the English proficiency of their new recruits. In 2014, the average new recruit had a score of 500 (ETS, 2014). However, the average reference mark to indicate English proficiency among new recruits is 635 (ETS, 2013). The students in this study therefore display better-than-average English skills for Japanese students. TOEIC scores are not considered by university admissions processes as suitable indicators of ability to study abroad.

The participants had varying amounts of previous international experience. Fifty-nine percent had travelled outside of Japan before, and seven students (15%) had lived abroad in the past, with two spending more than five years overseas. Only four students (9%) had studied abroad in the past. Three of these students had completed English as a second language (ESL) and academic programs of less than one month in Australia, the UK, and the USA, and one student had spent between three and six months enrolled in an ESL program in the Philippines. Two of the students who had studied abroad had also previously lived abroad (for periods of less than two years).

Results

Aspirations to study abroad

As suspected based on the students' choice of internationally-orientated university coursework, this particular group of students is positively orientated to study abroad. Of those who have never studied abroad ($n = 42$), 88% (37 students) indicated that they would like to. Only five of the students surveyed (11%, $n = 46$) indicated that they had no interest in studying abroad.

The students who indicated that they had previously studied abroad or would like to study overseas in the future ($n = 41$) were asked why they had chosen to or would like to venture overseas for study. In order to obtain a full range of reasons for interest in study abroad, the participants were asked to write an open-ended response and were not limited in the number of reasons they could give. Their responses were analyzed and organized into seven themes. The emergent themes are: English skills improvement, cultural knowledge acquisition, development of new perspectives, communication with others, experience acquisition, the study of content, and benefits to future career. Table 2 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned by participants. Descriptions of the emergent themes follow below, and examples of the participants' sentiments are presented in

Table 2 Reasons for interest in study abroad — frequency of occurrence and breakdown by gender ($n = 41$)

Theme	Frequency	Frequency by Gender	
		Male	Female
English skills improvement	18	8	10
Cultural knowledge acquisition	17	6	11
Development of new perspectives	8	2	6
Communication with others	7	4	3
Experience acquisition	7	5	2
The study of content	3	1	2
Benefits to future career	3	2	1

their own words. Participants were assigned codes which allow them to remain anonymous, but enable the reader to make connections between student responses across items.

English skills improvement is the theme most often mentioned by participants in this study. Many students view study abroad as a vehicle for improving their English language abilities, in particular their speaking skills. Perhaps surprisingly, only two students articulated a connection between English skill improvement and communicating with others, expressing desires to, for example, "...make progress my English skill. This is because I would like to talk with my foreign friends" (S17). Other students appeared to divorce English study from its real-world application.

Cultural knowledge acquisition is the second most frequently expressed theme. Sentiments included in this category centered on wanting to learn about and study other cultures. One student viewed the acquisition of cultural knowledge as a tool to facilitate implementation of their future employment plans.

Development of new perspectives. This theme focuses on "broadening horizons", gaining new knowledge and seeing "my country from other points of views" (S33). This theme differs from cultural knowledge acquisition in that it is transformative rather than merely focusing on learning. One student expressed a desire to "change myself" (S11).

Communication with others was described as a reason for interest in study abroad by seven students. Students see their time overseas as an opportunity to "communicate with people all over the world" (S43) and "speak with a lot of people" (S45).

Experience acquisition relates to the acquisition of new experiences in broad terms. Responses in this theme include things such as wanting to "experience something new" (S7), wanting to "see the world" (S16) and a desire to "check out" the "United States which is the center of global [sic]" (S36).

The study of content refers to comments made by participants regarding the desire to study business and management practices in the U.S. These students appear to prioritize the acquisition of context-

specific content over language skills and cultural knowledge.

Benefits to future career. The final theme relates to the direct utility of the study abroad experience to the students' future employment. Three participants mentioned desires to work in internationally-orientated careers.

Although the number of study participants is too small to draw any conclusions about the gender differences in motivations for studying abroad, it is interesting to observe that among these students, the biggest differences between males and females occur within the themes of cultural knowledge acquisition and the development of new perspectives. The female students appear to be more interested in going overseas to learn about different cultures and broaden their viewpoints than do the male students.

Study abroad and future employment

Although future career opportunities did not rank highly as a motivator for studying abroad, students in this study overwhelmingly believe that a period of international study will help them in securing future employment. Ninety-one percent of participants believe that study abroad will help them get a job. When asked to specify how study abroad will help them get a job, 38% ($n = 42$) responded that their improved English skills would help, 31% reported that knowledge of another country would help, and 21% indicated that increased intercultural communication skills would be beneficial. Four students declined to respond or gave unclear answers to this question. Analysis of these results by gender does not indicate any perceptible differences between the value of one skill over another in enabling the students to gain employment.

When asked about the type of job they plan to do after graduating from university, only seven students (15%) indicated that they would like an "international" job, either working for a global company, doing something connected with foreign countries, or involving English. Forty-six percent of the participants responded that they do not know what they plan to do. The others listed career intentions ranging from

owning their own companies, to working in marketing or for the government, to becoming accountants, editors or T.V. directors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Japan's working climate, of the students who do not believe that study abroad will help them gain employment, two wish to become accountants and one wishes to become a public official. The remaining student in this category is not sure what they want to do. Gender breakdown of these data shows that four of the students who wish to work in international professions are male and three are female, and the four who do not believe that study abroad will help them gain employment are divided evenly male and female.

Discussion and Implications

The students in this study show similar sentiments to those in other Japan-based studies (e.g. Bradford & Fujimoto, 2014; British Council, 2014b) when asked why they want to study abroad, citing a desire to improve their language skills, along with a desire to learn about another culture as their most prominent reasons. It is interesting to notice that these interests appear to be disconnected from their real-world applications, with sentiments connected to communication and the broadening of perspectives listed less often by the students. This implies that students feel as though they should improve their skills and knowledge, but do not have clear pragmatic reasons for doing so. This could indicate an intrinsic desire for academic and personal development, as suggested by Lassegard (2013), or could simply be that, as Asaoka and Yano (2009) propose, Japanese students are simply "good at following plans suggested by parents, university and society" (p.185) and are complying with the discourse they encounter often within their university.

The discussion becomes more nuanced when the students' opinions about the utility of study abroad for future employment are considered. The students overwhelmingly believe that time overseas will help them secure future employment. They believe that the improved English skills and knowledge of another country gained from time abroad are

the key skills that will enable this. For these students, future career benefits afforded by study abroad appear not to be a motivating factor in their interest in overseas study, but are a welcome outcome.

There is much discussion based on surveys of Japanese companies (e.g. Keizai Doyukai, 2010), media commentary and student opinion (e.g. Tabuchi, 2012) that Japanese companies do not value the skills that students gain through overseas study, and that students who have studied abroad have difficulty in finding employment upon return to Japan. Consequently, it may seem surprising that the students in this study believe that a period of time spent overseas will be of benefit to their future careers, especially since only 15% indicated that they would like to work in some sort of internationally-focused job. Indeed, these students were more positive about this issue than those in the larger survey conducted by the British Council (2014b). One possible explanation for this could be the fact that these students are all studying business, a field that is, in today's economy, inherently global.

As noted earlier, the Meiji University undergraduates that participated in this study are likely more internationally-orientated than the typical Japanese undergraduate. They have above-average English test scores and are enrolled in English-language content courses. Therefore, it is not surprising that a higher percentage of these students indicated that they were interested in study abroad compared to the more nationally-representative sample of students and recent graduates surveyed by the British Council (2014b). Despite this limitation, the results of this study provide insights into the perspectives of Japanese undergraduates towards study abroad. They can be useful to those seeking to understand how HEI stakeholders may capture the interests of and motivate those students who are most likely to take advantage of opportunities to study internationally. This is an important group of students to target with study abroad initiatives as, at Meiji University, fewer than 3% of students study overseas (Meiji University, 2015).

Conclusion

The dramatic decline in the number of Japanese students studying overseas attracted significant media attention and characterized students as inward-looking and not interested in study abroad. This paper has examined data regarding the international mobility of Japanese students and sought to clarify student perspectives to studying overseas. Research surveys, including this small-scale study of Meiji University students, have consistently shown that many Japanese students aspire to study abroad, and desire to improve their language skills, learn about new cultures and gain new perspectives. Recent government initiatives and HEI programs recognize student interest and aim to reinvigorate outward mobility by removing some of the obstacles students face when deciding to venture overseas. It is too early to fully assess the outcomes of such initiatives, yet the recent upturn in the number of students studying overseas indicates promising trends.

Notes

- 1 This figure includes foreign students who are residents of the country in which the data were collected (OECD, 2014). Therefore the total number of internationally mobile students may be lower.
- 2 e.g. the new International College of Liberal Arts at Yamanashi Gakuin University which opened in April 2015
- 3 e.g. Akita International University and Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University
- 4 Both traditional national and private institutions in addition to the newer, internationally-orientated HEIs.
- 5 Canada, for example, does not require students enrolled in language programs of six months or less to obtain a student visa, and students may travel to the U.S. for recreational study on a visitor visa, and so such students will not be counted in student-abroad numbers.

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